



TRENDS AND BEYOND

A Guide for Higher Ed Leaders and Innovators

Looking to stay ahead of higher ed trends as you plan your goals for the upcoming year? Whether you're leading the charge or executing plans, our trends research has you covered. This year's research analyzed over 4,700,000 mentions from 50 institutions of every type and size to bring you the most relevant and impactful insights. Empower your decision-making with our industry research created to fine-tune your approach to success!

Use these trends and insights to look at the context of multi-year trends for higher ed online conversation. Consider their relevance to your campus and actionable ways you might use them to focus your strategy and impact key outcomes.



When it comes to higher ed, the good news is that many of the trends we've observed over the last three years remained consistent.

The higher ed landscape may feel tumultuous, but in reality, many aspects remain predictable, empowering us to consider how our institutions can think and act differently to yield the positive changes they seek.

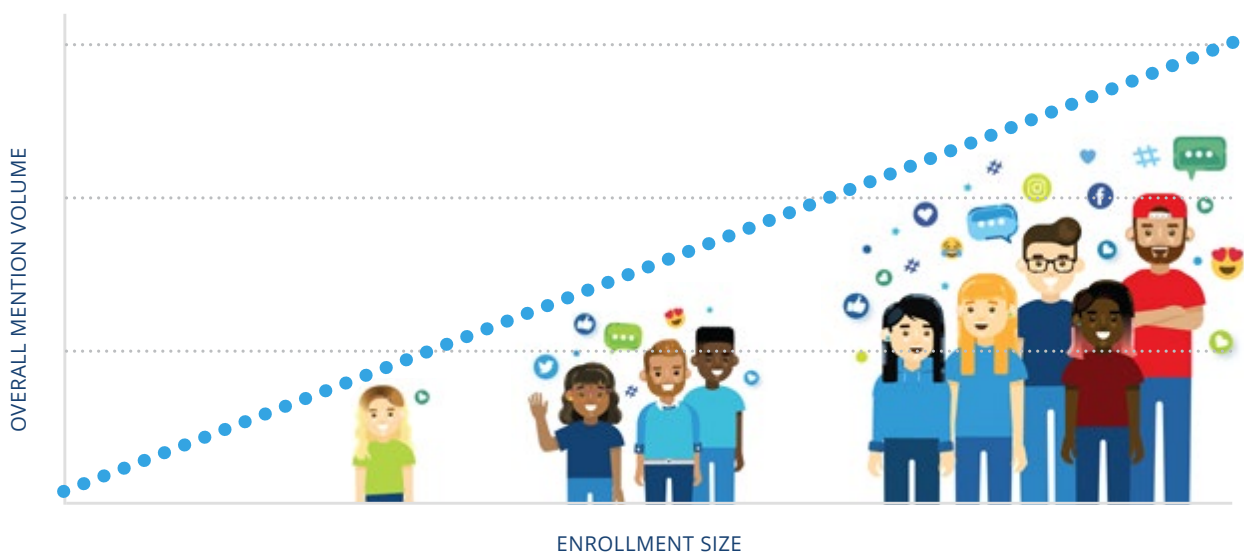
VOLUME

With volume increases of over 200%, higher ed conversation remained robust and ripe with opportunities across all institutional types and sizes.

Growth metrics stayed consistent across institutions, even when we removed athletics from the dataset. While there are normal fluctuations in volume based on the academic calendar, there's an increasing amount of online chatter from and about institutions to understand and use in adjusting our approach to meet campus goals.

We found a strong correlation between enrollment size and overall mention volume. This makes sense as larger campuses have greater brand awareness in the marketplace and access to more financial resources to support marketing efforts. However, conversational insights were present across institutions of every type and size, with general industry knowledge directly connected to strategic decision-making.

Larger campuses had a proportional advantage in conversation size, but institution-specific and general insights revealed opportunities and advantages for all campuses.





With nearly three-quarters of all mentions coming directly from your audience, what is said about your institution (earned conversation) overshadows what you say about your institution (owned conversation) 3:1.

This datapoint has remained consistent throughout our 3+ years of research. While you can't control earned conversation, it's essential to proactively learn from it to guide your institutional narrative. Earned conversation can determine the owned content that's most impactful for your goals and help you position your institution to resonate with your key audiences.



TREND TAKEAWAYS

Do more by saying less and prioritizing relationships over algorithms.

Bigger is not necessarily better for getting noticed and standing out among competitors. Rather than vying for a larger plot of conversation real estate, we recommend all institutions prioritize three things:

1

Know yourself. Whether online conversation about your institution is sparse or robust, what are the recurring themes? Large conversational awareness loses its meaning when it doesn't include the essence of what makes your campus unique, noteworthy, and worth a second look. In our experience, there's often a big difference between aspirational beliefs about your campus identity and the online conversation that reflects true external perceptions.

2

Know your audience. Listening and exploring what surfaces in online conversation about your institution is the most impactful way to understand your audience. Some key areas to focus on include confusion, anxiety, delight, and interest, particularly among key audiences like admitted students and alumni. The aspects of your identity that your audience repeats are the ones that stick. Good or bad, this knowledge is essential in crafting an institutional narrative that's memorable in the ways you'd like it to be and authentic in the eyes of your audience.

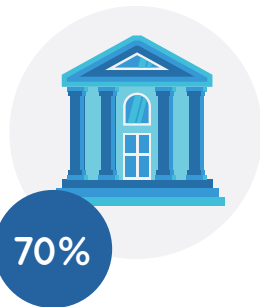
3

Prioritize engagement. The size of your institutional conversation matters less than the relationship with your key audiences. The most effective way to bring your campus identity and values to the forefront is through the relationships you build with your community, many of which are online. We'll focus on this as we look at sentiment, but rest assured that quality engagements, paired with clear, relevant content is worth your effort, even if it means pulling back in other areas. Invite meaningful connections rather than demanding increases in vanity metrics and watch your big-picture results shift.

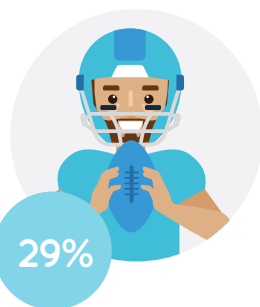
SENTIMENT

When it comes to sentiment, higher ed conversation remained consistently neutral, and that's a problem when it comes to connecting with your audience.

Speaking of engagement, public institutions engage more directly with their audiences—engaging in two-way communications via retweets/shares (42% median) and comments/replies (14% median) at a higher proportion compared to private institutions (RT: 36% median, Replies: 12% median).



Higher ed sentiment stayed consistently and overwhelmingly neutral, hovering at 70% across all conversation types. Not even the pandemic had a lasting impact on higher ed sentiment. We saw short-lived changes amid COVID-19, but conversation sentiment stabilized quickly after the early challenges of the pandemic.



Athletics holds a clear advantage for audience positivity; build on it. Athletics conversation held the highest median (29%) of positive sentiment when compared to overall (23%) and non-athletic (16%) sentiment. This was particularly true among earned audiences. Allow your athletics boost to go further for your brand by responding, re-sharing, and amplifying emotive user-generated content that arises in organic conversation.



Without athletics, there's work to do in creating emotional resonance with our earned audience. Non-athletics earned conversation held a less rosy outlook, with the highest median negative sentiment (9%) across conversation types. This tells us that when an institution's audience speaks negatively, it's most likely about the institution and less about its athletics.



TREND TAKEAWAYS

Do you see a pattern yet? The link to emotion is engaging with earned audiences.

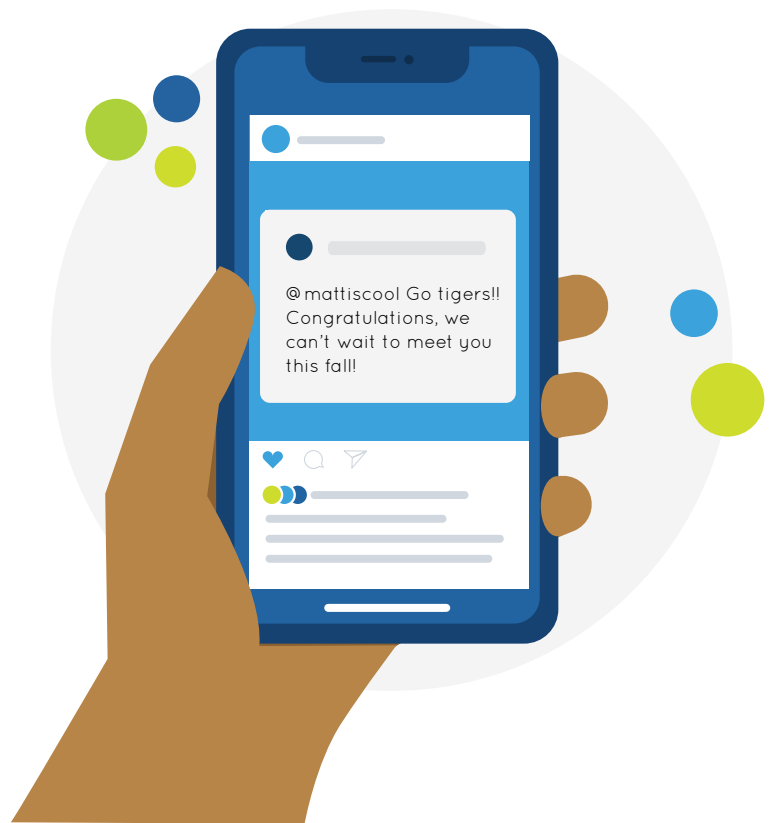
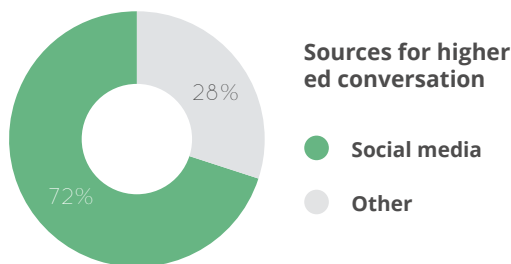
When institutions speak to and engage with their audiences, emotions surface and they highly influence decision-making. When the majority of conversation is neutral, it's less likely to spark the interest, emotion, or actions we desire from our audiences. However, it also leaves us with a golden opportunity to create emotional connection and resonance with the individuals who engage with our brand and content online. Here are three tips to help you do it.

- 1 Add emotional CTAs to your content process.** You evaluate your content and consider if it's interesting to your audience and if it highlights your brand pillars. Think about adding emotion to your process and determining what you'd like your audience to feel. Emotions are a cornerstone to connection. Adjust the language and lens so your content resonates at an emotional level, not just intellectually.
- 2 Capitalize on campus spirit within athletics and beyond.** Athletics lends itself naturally to positive sentiment and excitement. Capitalize on these moments by amplifying them and highlighting your audience's response by re-sharing and elevating their voice. Additionally, weave more excitement and campus spirit elements into all content types. There's no reason events and milestones on campus outside of athletics can't elicit that same sense of community, excitement, and poignant emotion.
- 3 Prioritize engagement with your audience.** Relationships are fundamentally rooted in emotions. When you take the time to get to know your audience, respond to them, and create meaningful content and relationships, sentiment and affinity organically grow.

CONTENT SOURCES

Social media maintained a stronghold, but news and forums gained ground when looking at where higher ed conversations occur.

Unsurprisingly, social media is the leading source for higher ed conversation, with an average 72%. Social media by nature is conversational. However, sometimes higher ed forgets the “social” component, opting for a digital lecture rather than discourse. Like in life, the best conversations incorporate more than one voice and perspective.



To make the most of social media conversation, remember that social implies a two-way conversation. It's essential to treat each channel as the ideal medium to respond, reply, and engage with your audience.



FORUMS

Making up 1–5% of conversation, forums are a smaller proportion but a mighty superpower when it comes to understanding your audience and enhancing your strategy. Whether or not you have an official presence on forums, it’s a glaring blindspot in your strategy if you overlook them. At the very least, we recommend putting on your imaginary Sherlock hat and investigating forum conversations!

Utilize the native search function and uncover what’s said about your institution. Students aren’t holding back when it comes to anonymously sharing their opinions and perceptions of your campus. Additionally, get the big picture by following relevant communities like [r/Applyingtocollege](#) to keep a pulse on larger audience trends like points of friction in the application process and reactions to higher ed news topics.



NEWS

News mentions often carry the potential for further storytelling with emotional impact and make up roughly 20% of all online conversation.

Speaking of news mentions, don’t let them go underused. News is naturally neutral, lacking that emotional “oomph” needed to create meaning for your audience. When a news article surfaces, treat it like an unknown actor with raw potential; develop and nurture it to perform at its best. Distill the “so what” for your audience, then do the heavy lifting for them, and present it as succinctly as possible in a headline.

Determine which aspects of your brand identity the news might highlight and what emotions it could elicit. Do the work so when you repurpose and re-share, that raw potential turns to results that call for a standing ovation.



MAIN IDEA

What's the key takeaway?

Across our analysis of higher ed conversation, the key to standing out and reaching campus goals remains the same; listen to your audience. Know yourself and your audience to prioritize meaningful relationships and create authentic stories that reflect and impression that lasts.

Institutions should know themselves and their audience, and prioritize building relationships to succeed in reaching their institutional goals.

At-a-glance Summary

- ➔ **Don't imitate; innovate when it comes to industry trends.** Understand industry trends and implement strategies that don't follow the lead of what other campuses are doing.
- ➔ **Adapt your approach as you gain audience insights.** Use social listening to understand your audience's needs and use them to inform your campus, content, and programming strategy.
- ➔ **Your brand is only as strong as your audience perceives it to be.** Your brand pillars are often an aspiration. Use social listening to determine your reality.
- ➔ **Prioritize relationships over algorithms.** Innovate and break away from the content machine and cycle of replicating generic messages that lack meaning.
- ➔ **Sometimes the key to greater impact is less content.** Refocus on what matters most: specificity, integrating campus-specific context with all storytelling, user experience, accessibility, and activating your community advocates.

Campus Sonar offers unmatched insights and expertise that build your capabilities, transform goals, and support community learning and networking.

Our partnerships support your team with industry expertise, social listening insights, and customized analysis, ensuring your campus stays focused on what matters—your audience and strategic vision.

[What goals do you want to achieve?](#)



We have a solution.
Learn more about what we
do and how we can help you.